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Memory in Public: Change and Continuity in Contemporary Polish Historical and Cultural Museums

Introduction

The current article focuses primarily on museums' public presentations of themselves through promotional materials such as Web sites and museum publications and, to a limited extent, museum displays. However, three main focuses motivate my ongoing, broader research project. First, my research will examine the concrete practices of memory and history work that occur "behind the scenes" of public representations—i.e., work in physical and virtual-world museums that present varied images of the Polish nation and its culture and history. I am interested in the specifics of how stories, artifacts, historical events, etc. are used to create, support, reshape, and challenge images of Polish culture and history, and how this happens locally. In other words, I am interested in tracing the specific assemblages¹ of factors—local stories and artifacts, individual museum workers, and local institutional structures—that articulate with large-scale narratives and official structures—themselves rapidly changing—to produce representations of Polish identity. While it appears clear based on visits and press coverage of recently opened or soon-to-be-opened museums in Poland, and globally, that multimedia and interactivity are becoming commonplace museum features, it is less clear how museum content is developing. Thus, I am interested in whether, and if so, in what ways, these images are changing in recent years in relation to the increased freedom of discussion following the end of state socialism and the social and political changes associated

¹G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1987.

with Poland's accession to the European Union, and in people's opinions about these changing images. How is history drawn on to present national identity/ies?

Secondly, my project will examine the individual life stories and motivations of the individuals who take part in this memory and history work. In my opinion, examining local, concrete practices of memory and history work may be as informative, if not more so, than examining in them on a larger scale, because local practices are grounded in the concrete experiences of individuals and thus may reveal a more complex interplay of forces and motivations. The focus on individuals will, I hope, also provide a corrective to one of the inherent dangers of a focus on the "production" rather than the "consumption" side of museum work—that is, the possibility of discovering in my research only official museum narratives that do not necessarily reflect the diverse background of perspectives, interpretations, and meanings out of which these museums developed and against which they are interpreted. In addition, while researchers have explored the different kinds of social subjects constructed by museums as institutions and involved in museum work—for instance, patrons, scientists and curators, and visitors²—there has been less exploration of how new museum technologies, as well as new ideas of what the museum is and what role it serves in society, are leading to shifts in these kinds of subjects and blurring of the divisions between them. I am interested not only in the memory work that is taking place, but *by whom* it is being conducted, and why. Who is telling their individual stories publicly, and who is remaining silent? Are people's motivations for getting involved with memory work personal or otherwise? In particular for those with little or no personal experience of life in pre-1989 Poland, including younger generations and people outside Poland, what motivates involvement (or lack thereof) with these historical concerns? In the case of memory work involving formerly present, but now largely absent populations (e.g., the Jews in Poland) and national and ethnic minorities, how, and by whom, is this work undertaken?

Finally, I am interested in the more global dimensions of public history and social change. Not only historical content, but the media of its presentation, are deeply bound up with their form and uses and the way in which they are treated in public discourse. In Poland, a shift has taken place from "underground," smaller-scale forms of memory work (such as personal histories and unofficial publications) to larger-scale public discourse (not only a shift toward free media and speech within Poland, but, for instance, large-scale national museums visited by both Poles and foreigners). The

²T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, Routledge, London 1995.

increasing prevalence of computer- and Internet-based media has furthered this shift, in enabling not only a wider national and international public for historical concerns, but also entirely different forms of commemoration (e.g., “virtual museums” such as the Virtual Shtetl (<http://www.sztetl.org.pl/>), tourism and culture blogs, and virtual information stations providing historical information, like those found in Łódź and Poznań, among other cities). On one hand, local assemblages of historical facts, individuals, and interpretations of national discourses draw on, and create, specific meanings. On the other, the forms of presentation of such histories create publics for whom they become meaningful and often contentious. Therefore, I also plan to examine how these shifts in the media in which history is presented change the structure of public discourse about it, and therefore the character of memory.

Historical Background

The historical, political, and cultural background against which museums displaying Polish historical and cultural museums are realized is complex and fraught with implications for both the understanding of Poland’s past and its future. Historical truth is materialized in different ways for different purposes, and local histories are woven into national ones in particular ways. In the process, different readings of the past and the elements that make them up are made to mean different things.³ The development of a historically conscious national identity is not only an academic one, but a popular one as well. Through practices and ceremonies involving everyday people, the meanings of historical events are shaped.⁴ The historical development of Polish national identity through the co-articulation of particular meanings and symbols in particular historical and cultural contexts can be traced by examining it over time. In doing so, the different ways in which it is being reasserted and resignified in contemporary contexts can also be analyzed.

The politics of history have been an important source of recent debate in Poland, both within the academy and in public spaces. This historical debate is important not only for understanding Poland’s past, but for shaping its

³ K. Brown, *The Past in Question: Modern Macedonia and the Uncertainties of Nation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2003.

⁴ M. Lampland, *The Politics of History: Historical Consciousness and the Hungarian Revolutions of 1848/49*, “Hungarian Studies,” 1990, 6(2), pp. 185-194; *eadem*, *Death of a Hero: Hungarian National Identity and the Funeral of Lajos Kossuth*, “Hungarian Studies,” 1993, 8(1), pp. 29-35.

future identity. Genevieve Zubrzycki⁵ has identified a dominant “national mythology” in Poland, reproduced in visual and material cultures and both shaped by historical events and reproduced in retellings of history, that is composed of two core myths: 1) that of Poland as intrinsically Catholic, and 2) that of Poland as “martyred for the sins of the world and resurrected for the world’s salvation.”⁶ The first of these two core myths was made evident in, to give one recent example, the “War of the Crosses” described by Zubrzycki.⁷ Zubrzycki’s book deals with the ways in which this particular concept of Polish national identity, and its associated framing of history, was debated by at least two factions at one particular site, that of the Auschwitz concentration camp. The site now stands as a museum and memory site commemorating the lives, and deaths, of those murdered in the Holocaust, and as a place individuals visit to commemorate and understand the past⁸. The second of these core myths developed primarily during the 20th century, and framed Poles as “victims cheated by history, abandoned by friends, and invaded by foes.”⁹ A third dimension of dominant national mythology concerns the image of “Poland as the heroic fighter *Za naszą i waszą wolność* (For our freedom and yours).”¹⁰

National myths in the sense that Zubrzycki uses the term are “stories that are posited by a given social collective as real, true and important.”¹¹ She emphasizes that this particular mythology, although dominant, is not hegemonic.¹² It is open to contestation, more so in certain conditions and historical moments than in others—implying the existence of other sources of historical meaning. Zubrzycki argues¹³ that on one hand, the end of communism was understood according to this dominant national mythology

⁵ G. Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2006, 2011².

⁶ G. Zubrzycki, *History and the National Sensorium: Making Sense of Polish Mythology*, “Qualitative Sociology”, 2011, 34, p. 26.

⁷ G. Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 2006.

⁸ J. Kugelmass, *Missions to the Past: Poland in Contemporary Jewish Thought and Deed*, [in:] *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, eds. P. Antze and M. Lambek, Routledge, New York and London 1996, pp. 199-213.

⁹ G. Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 2006, p. xiii.

¹⁰ M. Shore, *Conversing with Ghosts: Jedwabne, Żydokomuna, and Totalitarianism*, “Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History,” 2005, 6(2), p. 349.

¹¹ G. Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 2011, p. 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

as “the latest phase in the story of Poland’s fight for independence.”¹⁴ On the other, debates over national identity and historical truth have both destabilized and challenged these myths in an independent, globally connected Poland.

Since 1989, and particularly within the past decade, this national mythology has come into question as both historical truth and its meaning for Polish national identity have become subjects of complex and heated public debate. The factors affecting these changes are numerous and have shaped the situation in multiple directions, but some of the most important debates have concerned challenges to and reaffirmations of long-standing national narratives and their meaning, as well as official attitudes toward and policies concerning history.

The appearance of different historical perspectives and “debunking” of official and dominant national memory in public space after 1989 was the source of important debates. This process is perhaps exemplified by one of the most famous of these controversies, the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross’ book *Sąsiedzi (Neighbors)* (2000),¹⁵ which described the 1941 murder of the Jewish residents of the town of Jedwabne by their Polish neighbors, and which provoked a great deal of public interest and debate, some of which continues today.¹⁶

The past takes on the role of symbolic capital among politicians in particular.¹⁷ The idea of “new historical policy,” or simply “historical policy,” became influential in public discourse about the past in Poland in the mid-2000s. The term refers to a controversial set of political programs concerning the public treatment of history, whose vision of patriotism tends to be characterized more by the promotion of past glories and the building of a sense of national pride than by accounting with difficult past events.¹⁸ Among the concerns raised in both academic and public debates around the topic of historical policy are questions about the actual and proper relationships among knowledge, identity, and ideology within Polish historiography and museography.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁵ J.T. Gross, *Sąsiedzi: historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka*, Fundacja Pogranicze, Sejny 2000.

¹⁶ M. Shore, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ B. Korzeniewski, *Transformacja Pamięci. Przewartościowania w pamięci przeszłości a wybrane aspekty funkcjonowania dyskursu publicznego o przeszłości w Polsce po 1989 roku*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskiego Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Nauk, Poznań 2010, p. 8.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 205.

¹⁹ *Pamięć jako przedmiot władzy*, Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego, Warsaw 2008.

Defining the New Museum

In the absence of what Pierre Nora calls *milieux de mémoire*—spaces of lived and experienced memory—memory is retained in particular places, or *lieux de mémoire*, in which the past is deliberately evoked and preserved. *Lieux de mémoire* are produced, Nora writes, to protect against the sweeping away of lived memory by history, a threat which he sees as inherent to the modern era.²⁰ A museum is a particular kind of public display—and *lieu de mémoire*—connected with collective memory and national identity. Museums understood as *lieux de mémoire* are distinctive for the way they organize knowledge and meaning. First of all, museums, because of their connection with academic and official structures, are associated with science and knowledge, and thus seen as authoritative. Secondly, museum collections and narratives provide semiotic paradigms for the interpretation of their contents.²¹ In being displayed in a museum, objects—material artifacts as well as stories, photographs, etc.—become part of the collection, being resignified within the museum’s narrative in addition to retaining whatever original meaning or function they may have had.²²

Museums are also connected with collective memory. They both reflect the social and political culture²³ and help to shape collective memory.²⁴ Individuals visiting museums partake in what Carol Duncan calls “rituals of citizenship,” affirming their identification with the group represented therein and to some degree with the particular images of that group that are being presented.²⁵ Museums are connected with public memory, and the publics of memory, at local, national, and transnational levels, because they draw on resources of meaning at all these levels.

²⁰ P. Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire*, “Representations,” 1989, 26, pp. 12-13.

²¹ J. Baudrillard, *The system of collecting*, [in:] J. Elsner and R. Cardinal (eds.), *The cultures of collecting*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1994, pp. 7-24.

²² J. Baudrillard, *op. cit.*; J. Clifford, *The predicament of culture: twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1988; B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. University of California Press, Berkeley 1988.

²³ B. Jules-Rosette, E. Fontana, ‘*Le Musée d’Art au Hasard*’: *Responses of Black Paris to French Museum Culture*, “African and Black Diaspora,” 2009, 2, 2 (July), pp. 213-229.

²⁴ M. Żychlińska, *Muzeum Powstania Warszawskiego jako wehikuł polskiej pamięci zbiorowej*, „Kultura i Społeczeństwo”, 2009, LIII, nr 3, pp. 89-114.

²⁵ C. Duncan, *Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship*, [in:] *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. I. Karp and S.D. Lavine, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London 1991, pp. 88-103; 11-12.

Whereas many of the museums of the 19th and part of the 20th century, particularly art museums, saw their mission as one of enculturating and civilizing the general public, relying on discourses of scientific “truth” and artistic and cultural refinement—an impression made evident in both museums’ explicit descriptions of themselves and in their forms of architecture and display²⁶—analysis of newer museums reveals much more ambiguity with regard to both museums’ official missions and the forms they take. Do “new museums,” understood in a global context, comprise a definable category? It is difficult to say. While in some ways it appears that historical and cultural museums are shifting in the way they present their subject matter, there is indeed a great deal of continuity with regard to both form and content between museums conceived and constructed within the last few decades and older institutions. Older ideologies underlying museums, including the ideas of the museum as “cabinet of curiosities” and modernist temple of science and knowledge have not disappeared, but coexist, often in tense relationships, with newer and theoretically more democratic ideas, for instance, that of the museum as space for the dialogue of multiple voices²⁷ or critical institution.²⁸ In all of these models, the museum retains its power as the arbiter of dialogue, providing the institutional framing for visitors’ interpretations.

However, a few prominent general tendencies in recent museum developments can be discerned, and can also be linked to global cultural trends. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett²⁹ describes a “crisis of identity” experienced by museums in recent years. As museums have had to compete with other, increasingly accessible, forms of entertainment “within a tourism industry that privileges experience, immediacy, and what the industry calls adventure,” and have come to rely increasingly on earned income, they have had to shape their forms of presentation to fit visitors’ desires. In connection with this, and perhaps related to the fact that a large part of museum audiences have historically been made up of children, youth, and students, the museum’s role has come to be seen as one of entertainment in addition to, or in place of, its mission of education.³⁰ Descriptions of newer museums as

²⁶ T. Bennett, *op. cit.*

²⁷ This can have varying results; see, for instance, Jules-Rosette and Fontana (2009) on the Musée de Quai Branly in Paris, which promotes itself as an institution “where cultures converse” (*Là où dialoguent les cultures*).

²⁸ P. Piotrowski, *Muzeum krytyczne*, Dom Wydawniczy REBIS, Poznań 2011.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³⁰ S. Sayre, C.M. King, *Entertainment & Society: Audiences, Trends, and Impacts*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA 2003, pp. 42-43.

“theme park”-like have become a familiar form of comparison and critique.³¹ This description is prompted by immersive, experiential displays that on one hand provide visitors with new sensory and emotional dimensions of encountering history and culture, but on the other have been described by some visitors as overwhelming and disorienting. The idea of the museum as theme park also raises questions about the depth and seriousness of the presentation of material.

In keeping with this entertainment role, many newer museums act as multipurpose arts and cultural centers, hosting a variety of events such as concerts, games, parties and movie screenings³² and often designating space specifically for these purposes in their construction, as in the Warsaw Uprising Museum in Warsaw.³³ A brief look at the events calendar for the Warsaw Uprising museum—described in tourist guides as well as by many people I have talked with as an example of a technologically and aesthetically contemporary museum in Poland—revealed such diverse events as an Independence Day concert on November 11 and a game for families and children that encouraged them to walk around the city space looking for unusual sights in Warsaw. Many such events are connected with themes in popular and youth culture. For instance, the Musée de Quai Branly, a museum recently built in Paris which displays objects from African, Oceanian, American, and Asian civilizations, in efforts to attract young visitors, put on a Tarzan-themed exhibit³⁴ and a showing of the film *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*.

Technology has played an important role in shaping contemporary museums. Familiar technologies such as audio guides and, more recently, touch-screen displays installed in museums enable visitors to explore topics in more depth according to their own interests and at their discretion, although nevertheless still according to institutional framings. Other technologies allow visitors to use their own electronic devices such as cell phones to interact on a more individual basis with displays, creating what Kevin Walker³⁵ calls “personalized learning trails” on their trajectory

³¹ E.g., F. Choay, *Branly: Un nouveau Luna Park est-il nécessaire?*, « Urbanisme », 2006, 350, pp. 4-9.

³² S. Sayre, C.M. King, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

³³ M. Żychlińska, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Musée du Quai Branly, *Préparez votre visite*, accessed August 10, 2009 from <http://www.quaibrantly/fr/en>., 2009; *Tarzan! Ou Rousseau chez les Waziri* (catalogue), Paris: Éditions Somogy and Musée du Quai Branly, 2009.

³⁵ K. Walker, *Structuring Visitor Participation*, [in:] L. Tallon, K. Walker (eds.), *Digital Technologies and the Museum Experience: Handheld Guides and Other Media*, AltaMira Press, Lanham, MD 2008, p. 109.

through the museum. Although this type of interactivity is still largely at the stage of research,³⁶ some museums (such as the Centre George Pompidou in Paris, with its “signed viewings”) and independent Web-based initiatives have put it into practice. These technologies can, in addition, be used to bring historical and cultural knowledge beyond the walls of the museum as institution and into public space.³⁷ For instance, when visiting the city of Łódź in the summer of 2010, I noticed signs with QR codes attached to many of the city’s points of historical interest. Visitors with smartphones could scan these images and receive more information about the points where they were standing, thus bringing a museum-like method of presentation into public and virtual space.

Paul Williams’³⁸ description of “memorial museums”—which he defines as museums commemorating some kind of historical mass suffering, and which he identifies as having risen in prominence in the last few decades—can perhaps be applied in part to describe the museological correlates of a broader collapse of grand narratives associated with postmodernity. I thus quote at length his description:

Whereas earlier monuments tended to follow classical, religious, and native-landscape-related themes, linking soldiers’ sacrifices to national identity and thus valorizing them, these new types of memorials tend to be characterized by “minimalist and abstract design over that which is grandiose and authoritative; decentered and incommensurable space over that which is central and iconic; bodily visitor experiences that are sensory and emotional rather than visual and impassive; [and] interpretive strategies that utilize private, subjective testimony over official historical narratives. (p. 3).

Many newer museums have an experiential and personal orientation, relying on visitors’ sensory and emotional identification with people and places described for their effect. This orientation is arguably linked to global cultural trends stressing the importance of the individual and the primacy of experience.³⁹ This is accomplished through the use of often elaborately

³⁶ E.g. L. Tallon, K. Walker (eds.), *Digital Technologies and the Museum Experience: Handheld Guides and Other Media*, AltaMira Press, Lanham MD 2008.

³⁷ However, at least in the case of “traditional” museums (in the sense of institutions with permanent exhibition space), information remains tied to a central location.

³⁸ P. Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, Berg, New York 2007.

³⁹ A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1991; D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1989; Th. de Zengotita, *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live In It*, Bloomsbury, New York 2005.

reconstructed immersive environments—through which the visitor is encouraged to identify with those who lived through a particular time period or historical event—and, in history museums in particular, the display of individual lives (e.g., personal testimonies and biographies, photos of people) rather than larger-than-life heroic figures. New and innovative forms of visitor participation⁴⁰ also work to increase visitors' sense of individual agency *vis-à-vis* museum displays.

“In situ” museums—those that place the visitor into an experiential “virtual world”—are nothing new,⁴¹ but new technologies open a range of new multisensory possibilities for these types of displays, such as the use of audiovisual media (historic radio or television broadcasts, eyewitness footage, and digital reconstructions). These often go beyond reconstructing historical environments into the realm of the hyperreal,⁴² providing multiperspectival, larger-than-life experiences.⁴³ As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, “tourists travel to actual destinations to experience virtual places”—historically and culturally important sites are typically not presented to visitors in their original form, but are enhanced by means of descriptions, virtual reconstructions, and other information and presentations designed specifically for visitors.⁴⁴ However, given this pattern of unprecedented access to a variety of information and experience, questions must be raised as to how visitors' perceptions of historical events and cultural phenomena are being affected.⁴⁵

The “new museum” in the sense of contemporary, multimediated, experiential, and often entertainment-oriented forms of presentation—offering new *experiences* to the visitor—must therefore be distinguished from ideologically “new” museums in the sense of institutions that embody new,

⁴⁰ Visitor participation can take a variety of forms, ranging from, among others, looking at exhibits and forming one's own interpretation (as in traditional museums); to volunteer work and contributing artifacts, personal stories, etc. to the museum; to displays that allow the visitor to actually alter the display or participate in the performance (for instance, some of the events organized by the Lublin-based Teatr NN); to newer, technologically enabled forms of more active participation (L. Tallon, K. Walker (eds.), *op. cit.*).

⁴¹ B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

⁴² J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and simulation*, trans. S. Faria Glaser, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1994.

⁴³ I experienced one example recently while visiting the Warsaw Uprising Museum in November 2011. There, I had the chance to view the film “Miasto Ruin” (“City of Ruins”), a three-dimensional digital reconstruction of the destroyed city of Warsaw after World War II, shown from the perspective of a plane flying over the city.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁵ J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*; Th. de Zengotita, *op. cit.*; M. Żychlińska, *op. cit.*

critical, and democratic ideas⁴⁶ and thus challenges to *museum narratives*, although there is certainly potential for the two to overlap.

Within Poland specifically, the question of the “new” museum and its characteristics is also set against the backdrop of the aforementioned debates over national identity and the politics of history. While national narratives remain important in Polish museums, particularly in light of the “new historical policy” described above, other social and cultural forces and trends work toward the universalization of memory and the language in which it is discussed. This is also related to the “mediatization” of memory—phenomena in which mass media forms, which are often circulated within the nation and globally, represent and shape historical consciousness.⁴⁷

In my research, I have come across several well-advertised and technologically state-of-the-art historical and cultural museums that are either in development or have recently been opened in Poland. Among many others, these include the Warsaw Uprising Museum, the Polish History Museum, and the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw; and the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk. This phenomenon raises the question, first of all, of why now. What factors in the contemporary local, national, and transnational context and in recent history have prompted the development of so many new museums? The second question raised is what kinds of narratives these museums are putting forth. The new technological *forms* of many of these museums have been well-advertised. However, are the stories they are telling also new? If so, on what resources are they drawing to create and promote new, or at least less well-known, narratives?

As my research thus far has focused primarily on the public dimensions of museum narratives, with interviews in the initial stages for the time being, I cannot yet offer any conclusions with regard to individual interpretations. However, regarding public and large-scale dimensions of the position of the museum in Poland, I offer two preliminary hypotheses. First, I posit that part of the reason for the presence of so many new museums is a need for commemorative “rituals” creating and reinforcing (new as well as old) images of Polish identity in a time of contestation and “identity crisis”—in Polish national identity on one hand, but also with regard to museological and commemorative forms and practices.⁴⁸ Secondly, with regard to the idea of the “new museum,” I suggest that the *forms* of many contemporary museum displays are strongly reflective of new technological, experiential, and

⁴⁶ P. Piotrowski, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ B. Korzeniewski, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ V. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, Performing Arts Journal Publications, Cambridge Mass. 1982.

globally relevant models of the museum. With regard to museum *content*, while dominant, and traditional, national mythologies remain an important source of meaning within museums, alternative sources of meaning are being drawn not only from explicitly national mythologies, but from *local* sources on one hand and *transnational* sources on the other.

Case Studies

In this paper, I explore one particular facet of the museum as an institution: the visual and textual materials (catalogues, promotional brochures, Web sites) made publicly available by the museums, and to a limited extent their public displays. This is the case for several reasons: first, my research is currently in the preliminary stages; and secondly, some of the museums which I discuss in this article are not yet open and/or do not yet have a permanent exhibit space, and thus analysis of certain aspects such as exhibit spaces and public responses is not yet feasible. The analysis of such materials provides a limited and partial perspective on the role of museums in Polish society, namely, an understanding of the museums' public and official images. In particular, it can facilitate understanding of how the museum as institution constructs itself through its use of texts and images, and how it constructs—or attempts to construct—different kinds of subjects, including museum patrons, scientists and curators, and visitors.⁴⁹

My ongoing research project, of which this research is a part, attempts to address the museum in its broader context. On one hand, these images arise within a complex and contested political background of discursive formations⁵⁰ concerning local, national, and global notions of, for example, memory, history, truth, the Polish nation, and the role and function of museums. As far as how these complexities operate in the negotiations that take place “behind the scenes” within the museum—archives, libraries, and offices, for example—this aspect of the construction of discourse has been underexplored in the museum studies literature more generally.⁵¹

On the other, they are deployed into a similarly complex field of variously positioned social actors—individuals, groups, and institutions—who interpret and respond to them more or less actively. As discussed above, the

⁴⁹ T. Bennett, *op. cit.*; G. Rose, *Interpretacja materiałów wizualnych. Krytyczna metodologia badań nad wizualnością*, Trans. E. Klekot, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2010.

⁵⁰ M. Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Gallimard, Paris 1969.

⁵¹ E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Routledge, London 1992; G. Rose, *op.cit.*

conceptual space for visitor response to museum displays, while shaped by the institutions, is only partly constructed by them, and can take a variety of forms.

The institutions I examine below are only three of the many new museums representative of the phenomena I discuss above, and do not cover the entire scope of my research. In the interest of space, I have chosen to discuss these three on a comparative basis because all three are in the same city (Warsaw), all have been characterized as “narrative museums”—that is, museums that are driven less by the collections of material objects (of which there may be very few, or none) than by an overarching story being told—and all have either been opened in the last decade or are still in development. Factors I consider here include the museum’s official or public narrative (as described in promotional material or discussions with museum personnel acting in an official capacity); the physical display and presentation of museum materials; the role of critical reflexivity toward historical narratives; and opportunities for critique or participation by the museum’s public(s).

The Museum of Polish History

The Museum of Polish History (Museum Historii Polski; henceforth referred to as MPH) is a museum intended to encompass within its scope Polish history since the tenth century—including, according to a brochure available in the museum office, “the history of the gentry republic [*republika szlachecka*], the Solidarity movement and both restorations of independent Poland.” According to this same brochure, the emphasis is on “the most significant themes in the history of Poland—state and nation—with special emphasis on the idea of freedom...and on the struggle for independence.”

The MPH was established by the Ministry for Culture and National Heritage in 2006. As of the writing of this article, no permanent exhibit space had yet been built for the MPH. One promotional brochure for the MPH intersperses photos of past temporary exhibits and other events organized by the MPH with digital visualizations of what the completed exhibit space will look like, producing continuity between past and future museum activities by means of this juxtaposition. The images themselves depict spacious, dramatic exhibit areas, with multimedia technologies such as television screens and the use of lighting prominently featured. In the spaces depicted, familiar symbols of Polish history (a score of Chopin’s music; documents and logos associated with Solidarity) are made prominent. The pictures feature images of interested, mostly young visitors walking through exhibit halls and interacting with high-tech, tangible displays. The museum thus frames itself as contemporary and state-of-the-art (through sophisticated

exhibit spaces and the use of technology), yet at the same time traditional and familiar (through the prominent featuring of symbols recognizably associated with Polish history). The visitor is constructed as media-savvy and imaginative—characteristics which enable his or her participation and interpretation—and perhaps already somewhat familiar with Polish history. International visitors are also interpellated by the museum’s promotional materials through, for example, the use of bilingual (Polish and English, for the most part) information and advertising, international cooperative events, and internationally relevant exhibit themes (films from a Polish perspective shown to British viewers, in the case of one collaborative event with the Imperial War Museum in London; the “Families Separated by History” project, which seeks to link the history of Poles in Poland to that of Polish emigrants to other regions).

Three major temporary exhibits have taken place, along with a number of international cooperative projects, publications, and other projects and exhibitions (e.g., street displays, film series). The first, “Roads to Independence” in 2008, commemorated Poland’s 90th anniversary of independence, telling the story of Polish history from the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to the re-establishment of the Polish state in 1918 and the March 1921 national constitution. “Roads to Independence” included an exhibit catalog published by the museum, a board exhibition realized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and an Internet exhibit (<http://www.niepodleglosc.muzhp.pl/>) featuring many of the same photos and textual elements in the book. The narrative of “Roads to Independence” is a fairly traditional one, with much of the text drawn primarily from government documents and the writings of culturally and historically important figures. The exhibit’s photos depict for the most part historically important figures, maps (especially those depicting Poland’s borders and the changes thereof), battles, and representative scenes of everyday life and war. The emphasis is on imposition by foreign powers and the survival of the Polish nation despite this. A historical narrative at the level of the nation is foregrounded, rather than an emphasis on individual voices or specific local experiences are discussed.⁵²

The second major exhibition by the MPH, “Between the Wars: The Faces of Modernity,” was held in 2008 and 2009 (having opened on Independence Day, November 11, 2008) in the Royal Palace in Warsaw. This elaborate, multi-mediated exhibit—featuring such technologies as sound recordings and holograms to “harmonically join tradition and modernity,”

⁵² Muzeum Historii Polski, *Drogi do Niepodległości* (catalogue), Muzeum Historii Polski, Warsaw 2008.

as discussed by the exhibit catalog⁵³—dealt with the theme of “modernity” and its challenges and promises in the newly independent state of inter-war Poland (1918–1937), from both a cultural perspective and that of everyday life broadly, as well as to a lesser extent political themes (e.g., diplomacy). One notable feature of this exhibit was its focus on life apart from strictly military or political history, representing an implicit attempt to address a lack in predominant national historical narratives and museography and, in its focus on everyday life and individuals, a turn toward the “individualizing” museological trends described above.⁵⁴

Most recently, the MPH presented the “Separated by War” exhibit, dealing with the diversely realized yet well-known phenomenon of wartime separation of families in Poland and nearby areas during the occupations, border changes, and population transfers of the 20th century. The exhibit focuses on individual stories and makes an effort to tell not just stories it considers “representative” or only those of “typical” ethnic Poles, but to present the *diversity* of wartime experiences of those living in the present-day territory of Poland: children separated from parents, individuals deported to Siberia, a story of a Jewish girl hidden during the war in a Catholic orphanage, and—in a previously less well-described historical experience—forced conscription into the Wehrmacht.⁵⁵

The exhibit brochure⁵⁶ explicitly critiques national “martyrology,” a common theme, as discussed above, in much of Polish historiography. It offers as a corrective “civilian martyrology”—the experience of suffering by everyday citizens. There is thus a critique of national-level historical narratives; the implication is that the dominant narratives are not necessarily incorrect, but are incomplete. To “balance” national memory, it is necessary not to simply change or reframe familiar national stories, but to broaden the stories by remembering the experiences of civilians as well as soldiers and officials.

A related and ongoing (since 2007) project, “Families Separated by History,” elicits stories from the public in Poland and internationally (particularly England and the US) about their experiences from 1939 to 1989, and during World War II particularly, in an effort to exhibit a diverse range of experiences. The experience of the individual and his or her family—local,

⁵³ Muzeum Historii Polski, *Dwudziestolecie. Oblicza nowoczesności 1918–1937* (catalogue), Warsaw: Muzeum Historii Polski, 2008, p. 6.

⁵⁴ Muzeum Historii Polski, *Dwudziestolecie*.

⁵⁵ Muzeum Historii Polski, *Wojennie rozstania* (catalogue), Muzeum Historii Polski, Warsaw 2009.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*; p. 9.

specific stories—is paramount in this project. As the project’s Web site and the text of a handout distributed by the museum state, “Every account and story is invaluable, as there are no two identical family stories. All of them deserve to be recorded, because they testify to the vastness of experiences and complexities of Polish life in the 20th century.”⁵⁷

The influence of international and global factors, however, is also apparent in the museum’s activities. The methods and museography—the media of presentation—are contemporary and appear designed to appeal to the interests of both Polish and international audiences. Particularly in the two later exhibits, the focus on everyday life and stories of wartime suffering—individual, human experiences rather than specifically national ones—also indicate influences of the “universalization” of memory described by Korzeniewski (2010).⁵⁸ International collaborative activities have also taken place, with exhibits being held at the Imperial War Museum in London and the Parc du Cinquantenaire in Brussels.

The Warsaw Uprising Museum

Unlike the other two museums discussed here, the Warsaw Uprising Museum deals with a specific event rather than a more broadly defined cultural or national population. The museum was founded in 1983, but did not open until July 31, 2004—the 60th anniversary of the Uprising. The museum’s main aim seems to be to present and commemorate an event that was, and remains, important for Polish history and patriotism, but to update the media of presentation for a new generation. While the conceptual space for visitors’ interpretations of the museum’s exhibits appears to be the most clearly circumscribed by official narratives, the museum also acts as a sort of cultural center, presenting a variety of educational, cultural, and entertainment events related to Warsaw’s history, culture, and city space.

Visually and physically, the building is large and imposing within its city environment. A tall tower featuring the well-known “Polska Walcząca” (“Poland Fighting”) symbol rises into the air, visible long before one approaches the museum. The museum itself is symbolically sealed off from its surroundings by means of a large brick wall topped by a fence; upon entering the gate into the courtyard, the visitor gets the sense of leaving 21st-century Warsaw and being transported into the city as it was in 1944. The immersion continues in the entrance area, where one can leave one’s

⁵⁷ Muzeum Historii Polski, “Families Separated by War,” 2008. Accessed 19 December 2011 from < <http://www.rodziny.muzhp.pl/?jezyk=eng> >.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

bags and wait for tours. This space is small, noisy, and crowded, and its brick and paint walls feature slogans and “graffiti” with themes of freedom and independence. While visually and spatially somewhat disorienting, the museum is organized chronologically and thematically; as one follows the visitor path, one can collect “calendar pages” describing the events of each day leading up to and during the Uprising. The presentation is strongly experiential, evoking life in occupied Warsaw through the use of an often overwhelming array of original and reproduced artifacts and documents, reconstructed spatial environments, films, sound recordings, and digital reconstructions. The museum contains a research library, reading room, and archive; however, the average visitor is meant not necessarily to engage in a critical assessment of history, but primarily to identify with Warsaw Uprising participants’ lives and the reasons for their actions. As our English-speaking tour guide explained when I visited the museum in November 2011 with a group of Polish and international researchers, the Warsaw Uprising is commemorated as a “moral victory” for Poland despite the destruction and loss of lives during and after the event—at least in particular narratives of history, including that posited by the museum. The orientation toward visitors identifying with Warsaw Uprising participants is perhaps best exemplified by the children’s area, the “Hall of the Little Insurgent” (Sala Malego Powstańca), whose name itself immediately interpellates the young visitor into its particular narrative. A reproduction of the well-known “Little Insurgent” statue greets the visitor upon walking into the hall. Children can make art projects related to the museum’s themes, or send “postcards,” and a video playing on the TV screen features children dressed in military uniforms and conversing with soldiers, historians, and reenactors.

The Warsaw Uprising Museum begins with a central, uniting event, which itself is taken for granted in terms of both facts and significance, and from the “imagined community”⁵⁹ of people commemorating and identifying with it as part of a historical narrative of Polish morality and national pride, develops a center of experiential historical and cultural learning. Although experiential participation is an important feature of the museum, visitor contribution to museum content and space for interpretation are rather circumscribed, partly due to the nature of the museum as commemorating a historical event in a particular time and place. However, the museum’s Web site features more opportunities for participation. Interestingly, in contrast with the museum’s visually dramatic presentation, the Web site has a simple white background with the museum’s logo and words and photos

⁵⁹ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. Verso, New York 1991.

paying tribute to the Warsaw Uprising participants (e.g., the words “1944 Pamietyamy” [1944 We Remember]; historical photos of participants as well as images showing the museum’s projects and displays). An ongoing oral history project by the museum team, advertised on the Web site, collects interviews and biographical information from Warsaw Uprising participants. Web site visitors can also add biographical information about participants to an online biography list. The “O nas” (About Us) section of the site’s Polish-language version includes a detailed explanation, and a link to a form, about how interested individuals can help by volunteering (through, for example, education, inventory and conservation, and collecting oral testimonies from Warsaw Uprising participants). There is thus a possibility, albeit within a very defined frame, for interested parties to contribute to museum content.

The Museum of the History of the Polish Jews

The Museum of the History of the Polish Jews, founded by a non-governmental initiative in 1999, represents a fairly explicit recognition of, and attempt to address, particular lacks in dominant national narratives, namely the understanding of Polish Jews within Polish history primarily as victims of the Holocaust. Instead, it strives to present not only this time period, but the diverse, approximately 1000-year history of Jews and Jewish life in Poland. A feature of the museum narrative is its focus on presenting in its core exhibition the words, images, and stories of Polish Jews throughout history, in part to showcase diversity and counteract monolithic images of Polish Jewish history. This presentation technique also reflects the focus on everyday life and individual stories described above and the orientation toward narrative and meaning rather than, and in addition to, objects. The museum will include primarily these kinds of intangible objects, as relevant artifacts are held not by the museum itself, but by the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, one of the museum’s founding organizations.

Of the three narrative museums discussed here, this museum’s narrative seems to be among the most open to public contributions to the story being told. The visitor is, in a variety of ways, constructed as potential participant and contributor. Images on the front page of the museum feature young people actively participating—for instance, involved in performances or participating in discussion groups—as opposed to, for example, passively viewing static exhibits. A diverse array of projects in which interested people can get involved is prominently featured on the Web site, as is a section on how visitors to the Web site can help the museum (through, for example, volunteering, donations of materials, or financial contributions). Thus

virtually all visitors—regardless of their financial status or expertise—are constructed as potential supporters, and even as participants in co-constructing the museum narrative. This is likely in part a response to the lack of previous historical explication in widespread public narratives. The protagonists of the museum’s narrative are mostly absent, and the 20th century has seen attempts by totalitarian regimes to forget or erase their history. Thus a variety of available methods and sources, in the frames of several different sub-projects under the museum’s jurisdiction, are drawn on. The physical museum itself is as of the time of this writing in development, being built in Warsaw next to the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes and scheduled to open in 2013. The Virtual Shtetl, a Web portal, offers researchers, those with Polish Jewish heritage, and other interested people the opportunity to contribute information—photographs, stories, individual names and biographies, and other data—about Jewish villages in Poland’s history. Thus contributions related to specific local histories are solicited, in part to showcase the diversity of experiences and address the deficiencies of monolithic historical narratives. A third project involves the reconstruction, using traditional construction and painting techniques and drawing on archival material such as photos and building plans, of the roof of a wooden synagogue from Gwoździec in present-day western Ukraine, to be displayed in the museum when it opens—a new physical object, but representing historical techniques, places, and meanings. International organizations (such as Handshouse Studios in the US) and volunteers from various countries are helping to realize the reconstruction. Finally, the museum is associated with “The Polish Righteous—Recalling Forgotten History” project, which is dedicated to people who rescued Jews during World War II.

The museum’s set of projects is ambitious and multi-faceted. It remains to be seen what kinds of narratives the deliberate absence of an imposed narrative—i.e., allowing the “voices” of Polish Jews throughout history to speak—will leave space for. It will also be interesting to note how these voices will in fact be heard in a present characterized by competing and overlapping forces compelling historiography and its public presentation at once toward local, national, and transnational directions.

Conclusions

Based on my admittedly limited research thus far, it appears that new Polish historical and cultural museums encompass attempts to bring the past into the present in several ways—re-presenting and “re-ritualizing”

existing historical narratives, as well as addressing the shortcomings of these narratives from the perspective of the present cultural, social, and historical climate. A society's imaginations of its own past, in the form of history as presented in public, reflect current conditions and values; the past is kept alive in, and framed by, present interests⁶⁰. As such, trends in recent Polish museography reflect the multi-directional and complex influences on attitudes toward history.

In keeping with the idea of new historical politics, there remains a valuing of traditional historical narratives, at least in museums, which tend to be oriented more toward presenting history to the public than toward detailed critical historiography. To varying degrees, all three museums described above appear to engage with narratives likely to be familiar to the museum-going public in Poland—whether in reinforcing such narratives, supplementing familiar knowledge and perceptions and attempting to address the perceived shortcomings of existing museum methods, or, most commonly, both. Many of the exhibits presented by the Museum of Polish History, for example, deal with familiar historical themes, often presenting them in innovative ways or seeking new perspectives (e.g., individual, regionally representative life stories) from which to present historical events. The Warsaw Uprising Museum is based around a familiar historical event considered important in Polish national history and presents it to visitors through contemporary technology in a highly experiential manner. In doing so, the museum engages a public of museum-goers who identify with this history, and also presents an opportunity for ongoing engagement through cultural and educational events. The Museum of the History of the Polish Jews will attempt to draw on various sources of knowledge to craft a more detailed and diverse public narrative of Polish Jewish history than those that are currently well-known.

However, there has also been a recognition of both international museographical trends as Polish museums seek international audiences and partnerships and as “universal” media and ways of talking about memory become more present.⁶¹ The influences of the idea of the global, contemporary “new museum,” characterized by high-tech presentation and an individual and experiential orientation, are evident in the forms of all three museums described herein. Engagement with international visitors and collaborators—both virtually, for example, through the presence of interactive multi-lingual Web sites (offered by all three museums) and online

⁶⁰J. Assmann, *Pamięć kulturowa. Pismo, zapamiętywanie i polityczna tożsamość w cywilizacjach starożytnych*, R. Traba, introduction and editor, trans. A. Kryczyńska-Pham, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warsaw 2008; M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, translated and edited by L.A. Coser, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992 [1950].

⁶¹B. Korzeniewski, *op. cit.*

projects such as the Virtual Shtetl, and in-person, for example, the Museum of Polish History's international exhibits and the engagement of volunteers from around the world in the Gwoździec synagogue reconstruction project— additionally situates these museums in a context of international dialogue about memory, history, and the practices thereof.

With regard to museum content, the rise of local and specific stories and images, and visitor and volunteer participation in a diverse array of forms, are related both to attempts to critique and address monolithic concepts of history and, I would hypothesize, to a turn toward individuality and sensory experience in global discourses of memory. This phenomenon of emphasizing local, specific, and/or individual stories, evident to some degree in all three museums, points to a shift in both form and content with regard to museum practice and display.

Erica Fontana

**Memory in Public: Change and Continuity in Contemporary Polish
Historical and Cultural Museums**

Abstract

The past few years in Poland and, indeed, globally, have seen a shift from the predominance of traditional museums to the rise of multi-mediated, multi-sensory, and interactive “new” museums. However, in the midst of technological shifts in museum forms as well as broader social, cultural, and political changes, are the images of Poland and Polish culture and national identity, as presented in museums, also changing? If so, how, and what resources are being drawn on to construct new identities and/or reproduce old ones?

I am currently engaged in a study of museums—conceptualized broadly to include traditional historical and cultural museums, cultural and historical centers, and online archives and virtual “memory sites—in contemporary Poland. My study focuses on one particular type of museum “publics”—those most involved with and interested in the museum process, the workers and volunteers. I am interested in which individuals comprise this form of the museum public in the case of historical and cultural museums in Poland, their motivations for becoming involved, and their role within museum practices more broadly. I hypothesize, first, that new museums understood as a sort of public “ritual” represent in part a means of addressing uncertainty over national identity; and secondly, that local/regional and transnational resources, in addition to national ones are increasingly being drawn on in both museum form and content in the process of constructing new public images of Poland, in part in dialogue with broader and more diffuse audiences, but

also that these new images coexist, at times uneasily, with familiar discourses of the nation.

Keywords: memory in public, museums in Poland, interactive “new” museums, social, cultural, and political changes, national identity.